Innovation in Libraries:

Library Services for Those Who Served

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Abstract

For veterans, applying for Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits can be a daunting and challenging task. Our solution is an innovative Veterans Services Center that helps Rancho Cucamonga's veterans understand and apply for their VA benefits with the convenience and support of their library. In this paper, we will outline this robust and innovative service, which includes four components: a staff of librarians trained to help veterans navigate VA benefits, a dedicated workstation complete with two computers solely for veterans' use, pamphlets and handouts complete with helpful information, and an annual informational event that brings speakers to the Rancho Cucamonga Public Library to give presentations on VA benefits and other useful topics for veterans and their families. Next, we will discuss our proposal for marketing the new program to encourage participation, and our process for evaluating the program's effectiveness among patrons. And finally, we will detail our budget to support the establishment of the program and its continued cycle at the library.

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If you look up while driving along Haven Avenue, Milliken Avenue, Baseline Road, and 4th Street in Rancho Cucamonga, California, you will see over 400 banners dedicated to people from Rancho Cucamonga who are currently serving in the United States military (Rancho Cucamonga, n.d.). Located in San Bernardino County (home to several military installations), Rancho Cucamonga is a city that respects those who put everything on the line to protect and defend this country. Public recognition is important, but military service also entitles these people to certain well-deserved benefits—financial, health, and otherwise—through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). However, it can be difficult for veterans to understand and apply for these benefits. The Rancho Cucamonga Public Library's (RCPL) mission statement is not posted online, but according to Library Technician M. Casteneda, it is to "ignite curiosity, transform lives, and create community" (M. Casteneda, personal communication, December 8, 2020). One way for the RCPL to embody this mission is to become a bridge between veterans and their VA benefits. Through staff training, printed resources, dedicated computer space, and an annual informational event, our innovative service helps those who served us first.

Overview of Problem

One of the authors of this proposal works at a community college library in Rancho Cucamonga. This author reported that, on multiple occasions, student veterans visited the college library looking for assistance navigating their VA benefits. Unfortunately, the library did not have the resources to help, and the student veterans were forced to look elsewhere. As libraries exist to serve the information needs of their communities (Haycock, 2018), this was not the ideal outcome. Some veteran assistance services would be useful at the college library, but why limit

the service to college students? The RCPL does not currently offer any special services to veterans, even though, according to the most recent census estimates, Rancho Cucamonga has 7,231 veterans, about 5.4% of the adult civilian population of 133,666 (United States Census Bureau, 2018). The VA has a vision to "provide veterans the world-class benefits and services they have earned—and to do so by adhering to the highest standards of compassion, commitment, excellence, professionalism, integrity, accountability, and stewardship" (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020). However, a 2010 report found that only 41% of veterans said that they understood their benefits "a lot" or "some" (Westat, 2010, p. 74), indicating that outreach and educational services would be helpful for the other 59% to navigate the byzantine world of veterans' benefits. The benefits are there for the taking; veterans just need guidance finding them and applying for them. To reference Clinton's (2019) model for successful startups, we are offering a solution to a problem of convenience, making it easier to find and obtain something, but this is also a moral problem. It is unjust that a complicated system can prevent veterans from receiving what they deserve for their sacrifice and service (Walsh, 2015).

Roughly 2,749, or 38%, of Rancho Cucamonga's veterans are from the Vietnam era (United States Census Bureau, 2018). As this population grows older, who will explain Aid & Attendance and Housebound benefits, or benefits regarding burial and surviving spouses? The 400 service people represented by the banners along Haven, Milliken, Baseline, and 4th will one day be veterans. Who will explain to them how to apply for a VA home loan or student loan? Who will help them transition back into civilian life? We propose a veteran assistance service unique to the RCPL that will both help and honor those who have given so much.

Solution/Purpose

To address the needs of veterans in Rancho Cucamonga, we propose the library provide informational services. Our proposal to integrate the Veterans Services Center (VSC) in the RCPL will provide an innovative service that will principally guide the veteran community in accessing their VA resources. These services will comprise four essential parts, trained library staff, computer services, instructional material, and the yearly Veteran Affairs Outreach Day. The VSC will include credentialed librarians who will receive training from the Veteran Community Partnership, to learn to provide personalized veteran information assistance in navigating VA benefits. As stated by the VCP (2020), “through our partnerships we can add depth and breadth to our community impact and better support our nation's Veterans and their families” (p. 5). There will also be a designated computer station for veterans who visit the library for VSC, as well as pamphlets and other support materials provided that will articulate useful information regarding where to access their VA benefits. Veteran Affairs Outreach Day is also a yearly event hosted by the library that will guide veterans in accessing and evaluating their benefits. The VSC was created to provide enhanced support for veterans who alone could not access their well-deserved benefits.

This program will also foster new relationships between the users of these resources and the library, ultimately expanding their informational literacy in the process. Veterans who come to the library searching for help will often require guidance to articulate their informational needs, and trained librarians will have the capacity to guide their searches on VA resources. With guidance from librarians, the chances of veterans being able to locate and navigate through relevant resources will create a lasting impact on the community. Furthermore, we will host a yearly Veterans Affairs Outreach Day at the library to provide assistance to broad groups of

people with the support of the Veterans Affairs department. The event will host presentations from professionals detailing VA benefits, and other useful information for the RC veteran population, including their families and caregivers. We want to increase awareness of, and access to, support towards the veteran community and initiate outreach for those who seek help.

In order to extend this service and reach all possible beneficiaries, we will promote the service throughout the city. This includes, but is not limited to, speaking to guests at the Central Park community center to advocate for the VSC. Posting newsletters on the Grapevine, a press service that offers both online and mailed publications to the RC community can also prove to be a useful marketing resource. There can also be bulletin board postings created to highlight the service throughout frequented shops and restaurants in the city. Chaffey College can also be a vital source to promote the assistance of the VSC. Generating positive turnout and the highest possible impact from this service can be achievable with the support of the community.

Viability/Evaluation

Incorporating services for veterans in the RCPL will provide this community with the necessary informational guidance to access their VA benefits. As stated by Haycock and Romaniuk (2018), information literacy has a long-term outcome that promotes the ability to cognitively recognize and evaluate useful information. The purpose of this service is to establish a relationship between veterans and the library through informational assistance, resources, and guidance. Promoting the proper use of information for veterans will expand the community's opportunity to explore countless resources that can benefit their lives and develop further informed community members. Veterans and caregivers also have the opportunity to meet and interact with others through the outreach event which can result in a community forum of their own.

We are optimistic about creating a space for veterans in the RCPL and believe in the great benefits this will provide for the community. By encouraging veterans to visit the local libraries, we can tally the number of interactions with those who come to the library seeking veteran-related assistance. For those who seek direct assistance from appointed library staff, we can ask to provide feedback on their experience, as well as possible voluntary follow-ups to evaluate the impact and outcome of the assistance provided. Follow-ups would only require minimal information including email addresses and phone numbers. Another optimal way to track the success of the program is by recording the number of attendees of the outreach events and conducting evaluation summaries.

Keeping Luther's (2018) Total Library Assessment in mind, our impact determination and evaluation were designed with an assortment of methods that could provide a full picture approximation of the impact of this service. The evaluation of the veteran services is generated from a qualitative and quantitative approach to determine the value of the program.

Budget

Establishing a Veterans Services Center as an innovative service at the RCPL will come at a minimal cost, expanding on existing resources. The RCPL has internet and computers in place, however, additional computers for Veteran's services may be added; comprising a bulk of the proposed budget. As the RCPL is a local government entity, we will use the vendor Connection – Public Sector Solutions for technology purchases. This will allow us to optimize operations and maximize our budget. There will be no need for software purchases as Microsoft provides Office, Windows Operating Systems, server software and Client Access Licenses to organizations benefiting the local community (Microsoft, n.d.).

Collaboration with Veteran Community Partnerships (VCP), through the Office of

Community Engagement within U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, will provide the RCPL with online training; "increase[ing] access and enhance[ing] utilization of Veteran services and support" (U.S. Veterans Affairs, 2020). These modules consist of distinguishing between different sectors of Veteran's services, benefits, cultural competencies and psychiatric concerns. Along with training, VCP offers information packets to its partners to distribute at their facilities and events. With a second floor available for events, there will be no need to rent out additional spaces or equipment for our yearly event; needing only additional library staff and technicians (Rancho Cucamonga Public Library, n.d.). Total cost for the RCPL:

Vendor (Connection – Public Sector Solutions) one-time costs:

Computers (x2)	
Hard Drive	$760.00/each
Keyboard & Mouse Combination	$30.95/each
Monitor	$99.00/each
	$1,779.90

Event Staffing (Rancho Cucamonga Public Library) yearly costs:

Library Services Staff (4)	$320/event
Library Technician (1)	$100/event
	$420 annually

We propose an initial budget of $2,199.90, to establish the Veteran Services computers and annual event. Thereafter $420, annually for the single informational event that will be held at the Rancho Cucamonga Library.

Comparable Services

Outside of the Rancho Cucamonga community, other libraries have implemented comparable veteran services for their patrons. For example, the Ontario City Library has a Veterans Resource Center, which provides services such as assistance for finding housing, securing employment, disability and education benefits, and receiving compensation and pension claims. This library also provides take-home guides to their veteran patrons that outlines various resources (City of Ontario Southern California, n.d.).

The California State Library utilizes their Brainfuse Vet Now program to offer support for veterans. This program allows users to send questions to librarians outside of normal hours to inquire about any challenges with navigating the VA system (Brainfuse: Vet Now, n.d.). They also link additional, external resources for vets to research things like housing, education, and healthcare (Brainfuse: Vet Now, n.d.).

Though these services are similar in their offerings and purposes, the four components of our program make it especially unique. Instead of using volunteers, our library staff is trained to offer guidance on VA benefits and be fully equipped to support veteran patrons in need of this service. Furthermore, our fully dedicated computers and Veterans Affairs Outreach Day make this service a robust offering for veterans that goes above and beyond typical veteran programs offered by other libraries.

Conclusion

The Veterans Services Center at the Rancho Cucamonga Public library seeks to serve those who have served for us. The RCPL's mission is to transform lives and create community, we aim to enhance this mission by providing our Veterans with educational services, engagement and guidance.

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